

FAITH AND CITIZENSHIP: THE AFRICAN EXPERIENCE

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1. Preliminary Remarks

I would like to begin my address by first and foremost thanking the leadership of the Anglican Communion Network for Inter Faith Concerns (NIFCON) for organising this conference on African soil and for choosing a theme/topic which in many ways reflects some of the current challenges in the continent.

I would also like on behalf of the Programme for Christian-Muslim Relations in Africa (PROCMURA) bring you greetings and say how grateful we are to you for inviting us to this conference, and for giving us the opportunity to provide a reflection on its theme. As you may have been informed by Archbishop Josiah Idowu Fearon, chairperson of PROCMURA, and also one of the presidents' of NIFCON, we in PROCMURA for the past few years have been looking at the question of Christians and Muslims living as co-citizens in Africa. We did so in small measure and shall do so in large measure in the years to come.

The presence of our Muslim neighbours in this particular session demonstrates the importance of the topic for all people of faith in Africa, and perhaps in the entire world in which we live and practise our respective faiths. To our Muslim neighbours, let me say that your presence is especially important not just because Christians and Muslims form the majority of Africa's religious population, but more importantly because the question of citizenship and all that it entails usually generate interesting discussions between members of the two faith communities.

2. Introduction

Any person who is conversant with Africa, its peoples, and their world view, will without doubt agree that Africa is a religious continent and its people therefore, a religious people. Historically, African Traditional Religion(s), the primordial religious heritage of the African, was many years ago joined by Islam and Christianity to form what has come to be referred to as Africa's triple religious heritage. With time Hinduism, Sikhism, Judaism, Jainism, the Baha'i, among others, joined this triple religious heritage of the African to produce Africa's rainbow of religions.

A triple religious heritage that eventually evolved into a rainbow of religions has in the recent past turned to a mosaic of religions as variants of the religions mentioned above joined 'the pioneer religions' to seek and to attract the African heart. Today, new religions and religious movements, some of which we are yet to acquaint ourselves with, are parading themselves all over the continent. With these developments, it can be said without any fear of contradiction that religion plays a pivotal role in shaping the variety in African cultures and values.

The growing religious plurality in the African continent coupled with the ethnic, tribal, and linguistic diversities which are part of what it means to be African, also means that the African has multiple identities - the African wears many hats. In a situation as described, the question of citizenship poses a great challenge to the African personality. For example, in Kenya, one may describe himself/herself as a Kenyan, a Kikuyu, and a Christian of the Anglican Communion; just as in Ethiopia one may say I am an Ethiopian, an Oromo, and a Muslim and may even add that he/she belongs to the Tijaniyya Sufi fraternity. In a similar vein, in Nigeria one may say I am an Igbo, a Christian of the Catholic faith, just as one may also say I am a Hausa, a Muslim of the Wahhabiyya reformist fraternity. This maze of the African personality produces a complex understanding of citizenship.

When African Nationalist movements agitated for independence from Colonial rule in the late 1940's through to the late 1960's, one of the issues they had to take seriously was how to bring together the multiple identities of African peoples into belonging to nation-states with common citizenship sharing equal rights and responsibilities. For the Nationalist Movements the acceptance of common citizenry in spite of plurality or as a result of it, was regarded then as now, to be paramount - 'One nation, one people, one destiny' became the overwhelming slogan.

With this background, it can successfully be argued that the notion of citizenship of nations in the broader and modern sense (and not Kingdoms and Chiefdoms which Africa has had a long history of), is a 20th century product which is continually worked on. In today's Africa, therefore, the notion of common citizenship with equal rights and responsibilities for all peoples remain a journey – no nation has arrived there yet.

Ethnic and tribal unions remain strong and continue to play very influential roles in national issues and provide solidarity in regionalism of African nations. It needs to be emphasised, however, that the ethnic and tribal solidarities in national politics which, as we have said, militate against national unity and a sense of common citizenry are often played within national boundaries.

An emerging trend that seems to pose the greatest challenge to common citizenship for African nations, however, is religion – specifically Christianity and Islam. The universality of these two faiths and the fact that they command very large followings around the world has created a new twist for Africa's bid to keep its people united in citizenship. It is to this Christian and Muslim faith traditions (the main focus of our presentation) that I now turn to.

3. Christendom, the Body of Christ, and citizenship

In Christianity, Christendom as a coined word that sought to unite all Christians into a form of a kingdom outlived its usefulness when it learnt from experiments in history (perhaps beginning with Constantine) that Religion and State cannot be embodied in one person or institution, and at the same time produce equal citizenship with equal rights and responsibilities for all. The lessons of this historical experiment produced what has come to be known as the separation of Religion and State – a move that has by and large restored the Churches prophetic voice of calling rulers of nations to order when citizens' rights are violated.

As a result of these lessons of history, Christendom which sought to produce political solidarity for Christians gave way to the spiritual unity of Christians everywhere and anywhere, as a people who belong to the Body of Christ - a kind of mystical union which transcends political borders, colour or race. In Christ there is no east, no west, no north, no south, no white, no black etc. With this Christianity looks up to a heavenly citizenship – our common citizenship is in heaven.

In Kusaal (one of the many languages spoken in the northern part of Ghana), Christians sing a song that depicts the world we live in as a market place where we have come in to buy, sell, and socialise, and when time comes we go home. This song in all intent and purposes suggests that for the Kusasis, and for many Christians for that matter, real citizenship is in heaven. This song most certainly can be equated with St. Augustine of Hippo's "City of Earth" where we are all 'exiled' and look forward to returning to the "City of God" where our ultimate citizenship belong. It is perhaps worth passing a comment to say that whether the world we live in is 'a market' or 'City of Earth' or whatever the case may be, there still must be rights and responsibilities in this market or 'City of Earth' to avoid chaos before we go to the Ultimate 'City of God' – returning home from the market.

4. The Muslim Caliphate, the Universal *Ummah*, and citizenship

In Islam, the story has been similar to that of Christianity but with some stark divergence. The Islamic concept of the Caliphate as a political movement that sought to bring the Muslim faithful worldwide together into one organic community collapsed when it degenerated into dynasties (Abbasids), and then into empires (the ottomans).

The form of citizenship these models produced was in many ways like Christendom in the sense that there was no equal citizenship since it allocated certain rights and responsibilities to those outside the household of Islam. Dreams of returning to any model in semblance to the caliphate lost out when nation-states were formed in the Arab and Muslim worlds in the 19th and 20th Centuries, and Muslims worldwide became citizens of the various nations/countries.

The universal Muslim *Ummah* (translated Community) which holds the view that Muslims everywhere and anywhere belong together, present the form of unity (perceived to be both temporal and spiritual) that transcends established borders of nation-states/countries – in the *Ummah* there is no east, no west, no north, no south, no white, no black etc. The model of the *Ummah* provides a form of Muslim citizenship which is difficult to define but which shows itself more and more in times of crises. It is well known, for example, that Muslims anywhere and everywhere provide physical support to their co-religionist or otherwise demonstrate in solidarity with fellow Muslims who are facing any form of persecution and injustice from any other, except by fellow Muslims.

5. Christians and Muslims as Co-citizens in Africa

For many years, Christians and Muslims in Africa have lived together respecting the universality of their respective faith traditions as well as the particularity of the same. It has almost become routine to cite examples of African communities and families who live together in the same households and community with intra-faith and interfaith differences in peace and solidarity – a mini form of citizenship. They eat together, work together, celebrate the diverse religious festivals together, share in the joys of birth and the sadness of death, and jointly work towards the development of the community.

This phenomenon, which I have described somewhere as practical theology brewed in the African pot, demonstrates that innate African spirituality which in essence focuses on existential matters, contrast with religious ideology that tends to categorise people as belonging or not belonging. The family and community mini citizenship found a broader sense of belongedness in national citizenship when nation-states were founded.

As a positive consequence of the above, politics was also played around this broader understanding of citizenship in many countries. In this light, Leopold Senghor, a devout Catholic, could in the 1960's be voted to be the President of Senegal, which is a predominantly Muslim country, and in the 1990's, President Bakili Muluzi, a devout Muslim, was voted president of Malawi which is a Christian majority country. The understanding then, as now, was that religion should not serve as a divisive tool that segregates people into clusters.

Arguably, this model was and is the African view of religion, and not the Christian or Muslim view, which as we have described earlier, tended to create dominant spaces for themselves and little space for others.

When the Muslim and Christian views came into play as far as common citizenship is concerned, members of the Muslim faith, especially, began to form political parties along religious lines. To mention but two, the Muslim Association Party (MAP) was formed in Ghana in the late 1950's, and the Islamic Party of Kenya (IPK) in the 1990's. The formation of parties along religious lines was perceived to be a move to revisit the historical precedence of religion and state being combined into one institution, which could easily derail the equity that common citizenship is supposed to provide. As a consequence, MAP was proscribed, IPK refused registration, and national constitutions reviewed to include in them clauses that prevent the formation of political parties along religious lines.

In the Christian front, President Chiluba of Zambia declared his country a Christian nation. This move was utterly rejected by Christian leaders all over Africa, perhaps as a result of the historical experience of what Christendom meant and why the churches moved away from that concept.

We have in this presentation so far indicated the multiple identities that Africans have. We have said that tribal and ethnic identities have been divisive elements as far as common citizenship is concerned. These divisive elements, we argued, were/are within the borders of nations. The universalistic nature of Christianity and Islam, it has been argued, introduced into the African continent a complex divisive element that transcends the borders of nations. Christendom and the Caliphate, which in our view would have divided the world along politico-religious lines gave in to the mystical union of all Christians belonging to the Body of Christ, and all Muslims belonging to the universal *Ummah*. Attempts to re-introduce these two concepts (Christendom and Caliphate) in small measure, and within borders of nations through the formation of religious parties or declaring countries to be states of one religion has been unacceptable in the African context. They have been unacceptable because they militate against the common citizenship, which African nations continually work on. In the next section we shall wind up our discussion by looking at what the Christian concept of the Body of Christ and the Muslim Concept of the *Ummah* have influenced what it means to be a citizen in a given country.

5.1 The Scenario of the Body of Christ, the Ummah, and Citizenship

Christians being members of the Body of Christ, and Muslims being members of the universal *Ummah* have created clusters of solidarity, which since the 1990's have militated against the unity of nations and the quest for common citizenship. The perception that Western countries are predominantly Christian, and the Arab East predominantly Muslim has created a situation whereby when there is conflict between the West and the Arab East it is perceived to be conflict between members of the Body of Christ (Christians) and members of the *Ummah* (Muslims).

It is well known, for example, that when America and her western allied forces invaded Iraq both in the 1990's, in what came to be called 'Operation Desert Storm' and in 2003 in what is now regarded as a pretext that Saddam Hussein still had weapons of mass destruction, Muslims demonstrated in many parts of Africa in solidarity with fellow Muslims who they believed were unduly attacked by the West. Some of these demonstrations degenerated into confrontations with Christians.

These clashes, which by no means were the norm in Africa, exposed the vulnerability of the notion of common citizenship in some parts of the continent as it set citizens against fellow citizens. This leads us to ask a number of questions. Can citizens turn against themselves because of a difference between their respective universal faith traditions? Is one individual more a citizen of his/her religious group anywhere and everywhere than the nation where she/he lives as a citizen with others who do not share a religion with him/her?

These questions bring us to the two main issues which PROCMURA, as we said in the introduction, has been analysing for the past two years. Will members of the two faith communities in Africa see themselves when it comes to the question of citizenship as being African Christians or Christian Africans? In the same vein, do Muslims see themselves as African Muslims or Muslim Africans? To put it succinctly, do Christians see themselves

as Christians who happen to be Africans or Africans who happen to be Christians? In a similar fashion, do Muslims see themselves to be Muslims who happen to be Africans or as Africans who happen to be Muslims?

These statements could also be looked at in terms of countries and nation-states, as for example, whether one is a Christian Kenyan or a Kenyan Christian; a Muslim Kenyan or Kenyan Muslim etc. Granted that choices of this nature have to be made, one would want to ask when one's Kenyanness, Ghanaianess, Nigerianness, Ethiopianess, Ivorianess, Senegaleseness etc end and when one's Christianess or Muslimness begins. Is there no way one can be truly African and truly Muslim or Christian?

The past and immediate fallacy of the emerging trend of religious particularism that sets citizens against fellow citizens in the name of an *Ummah* and a sense of belonging to the Body of Christ is that Christians have fought wars against fellow Christians (the Body of Christ) as evidenced by the two world wars, and Muslims have fought against fellow Muslims (the *Ummah*) as evidenced by the Iraq-Iran war in the 1980's. These wars, in general terms, were fought by citizens of a given country against citizens of another country. This scenario poses a question as to when Christians and Muslims can regard national citizenship as taking precedence over being the Body of Christ or the *Ummah*, respectively, and vice-versa.

In the African continent the most immediate example is the Darfur crises where the Arab Militia commonly called the Janjaweed are in battle with the black African tribes commonly referred to as the rebels. The irony of the situation is that the two warring factions are members of the *Ummah* just as in the history of Northern Ireland the sectarian violence could arguably be said to have been between members of the Body of Christ.

A growing trend where the universal nature of Islam and Christianity are not harnessed properly to bring about constructive relationships of people in a given environment to live as co-citizens working to promote peace and development is a growing concern in Africa as it is elsewhere. The situation is worse in some African countries where politicians play the religious card in campaigning for elections and thus encourage citizens along religious lines. This, as one would notice, goes against the spirit of the fathers of modern Africa such as Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, Julius Nyerere of Tanzania, among others, who advocated unity and common citizenship in spite of ethnic, tribal, cultural, linguistic, and religious difference.

Africa's ethnic, cultural, and religious diversity enriches when it finds grounds in a common citizenship that produces a uniformity of a kind where the various diversities are celebrated and recognised as producing the whole and not further segments. These can be done by constructive focus by people of faith and in the context of this gathering, Christians and Muslims who will be in solidarity with all for good and not being sectarian to the extent of globalising conflict in the name of the Body of Christ or the *Ummah*.

We recognise that anthropomorphism or speaking of God in pure human terms is unacceptable to Muslims but still would like to say in the form of an analogy that if God/ Allah were understood by all to have eyes, heart, and emotions like humans, then He would be weeping from time to time when He recognises what members of the Body of Christ and the *Ummah* have done and continue to do in His name.

A common citizenship of nations in Africa as in elsewhere should be seen in collaborative efforts for the total spiritual and physical development of humankind that would translate itself into common citizenship in God's world and eventually an ultimate citizenship in paradise where Christians and Muslims claim to be their prime focus and which God alone has the right to decide on who shall be there – if He has not already done so.